

Fort Myer, Virginia's Place in Aviation History

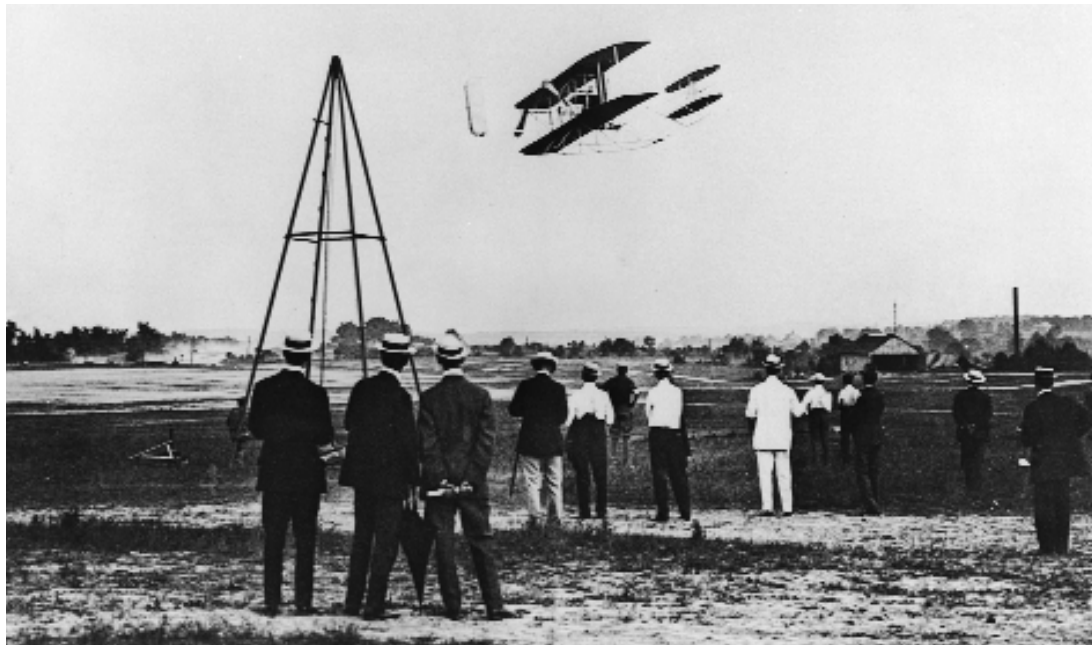
Not many people knew of the Wright brothers' 1903 achievement until years after it occurred. There were few witnesses at Kill Devil Hills or newspaper accounts of the event, and those who heard the news were quite skeptical. In September 1908, Orville Wright made a number of exhibition flights at Fort Myer in Arlington, Virginia (adjacent to Arlington National Cemetery). Several thousand people witnessed these flights which finally showed the American public that powered flight was a reality (Wilbur made his first public flight a month earlier in Paris).

In December 1907, the Army's Chief Signal Officer requested bids for a flying machine with specifications generally thought to be impossible. Many in the aeronautical community predicted that the Army would not receive any bids, but the Wright brothers signed a contract and delivered the machine to Fort Myer in August 1908. It could carry two people, fly more than 40 miles per hour, make a one-hour endurance flight, and was controllable

in flight in any direction. Signal Corps Airplane No. 1 was the first military airplane in the world.

The specification required flights to demonstrate performance, and Orville Wright circled Fort Myer's parade ground in the airplane built for the Signal Corps. A national historic landmark district, designated in 1972, includes the parade ground and a number of historic buildings at Fort Myer. In 1958, the Army dedicated a large marble marker in commemoration, and recently produced a walking tour brochure that highlights the flights. In 1995, an Army sergeant found film of the first military airplane in flight at Fort Myer in the basement of the headquarters building. This edited version of two original films included footage never seen before by current-day experts on early aviation, and it was transferred to the National Archives and Record Administration in 1997.

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Orville Wright flying the first military airplane at Ft. Myer, Virginia, 1908. Photo courtesy Special Collections and Archives, Wright State University.